DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 340 RC 017 812

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TITLE Adolescence--A Tough Time for Indian Youth. What Can We Do?
INSTITUTION Native American Development Corp., Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 26p.
AVAILABLE FROM Native American Development Corporation, 1000 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 1206, Washington, DC 20036.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Development; Adolescents; Alcohol Abuse; American Indian Education; *American Indians; Counseling; *Developmental Tasks; Family Role; *Guidance; Parent Role; Youth; *Youth Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Adult Child Relationship

ABSTRACT

This brief booklet, based on interviews with Gay Munsell, a Native American child development specialist, with the National Resource Center for Youth Services at the University of Oklahoma, examines the difficulties experienced by Indian youth in confronting the problems and changes of adolescence. In urban areas, 80% of Indian youth drop out of school, compared with 50% of reservation Indian students. Up to 25% of Indian youth display symptoms of psychological problems, and many Indian youngsters live in environments with a high rate of alcoholism and other drug abuse; in fact, Indian youth use alcohol at a rate three times that of adolescents in the general population. Adolescence is a time of change, when a child's mind becomes capable of abstract thinking. As their concepts of time mature, young people begin to see themselves as individuals and are confronted with the need to define their relationship with the future. Adolescence implies six primary tasks: (1) learning to think abstractly; (2) learning to distinguish between the real and the ideal; (3) deciding how one relates to the past and future; (4) developing independence; (5) defining individualism; and (6) determining how, as an individual, to fit into and function in the world beyond family and community. Aside from these normal adolescent tasks, Indian youth must also struggle with their cultural roles and identities. Negative coping patterns, such as reliance on drugs and alcohol, often develop. The booklet suggests strategies to make adolescent transitions smoother, including: (1) strengthening a youth's sense of being a valued member of the family; (2) raising youth's self-esteem; and (3) helping youth strengthen relationships with significant adults. The document encourages adults to establish relationships with Indian adolescents based on patience and trust. (TES)

ED326340

ADOLESCENCE— A TOUGH TIME FOR INDIAN YOUTH

RC017812

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Adolescence— A Tough Time for Indian Youth

How Can We Help?

Introduction

Adolescence is a tough time for any youngster. For Indian youth, it's even tougher.

Adolescence for any youngster is a time of change and a time of personal and interpersonal conflict. For Indian youth, it is all this plus a time in which the world of their being Indian collides head on with the world around them.

Data is emerging to show certain patterns for Native American adolescents: a high percentage of Indian youth turn to drugs and alcohol; the better an Indian youth feels about himself and his culture, the better he fares during the journey through adolescence; in the long run, most youth tend to return to the teachings and values of their childhood.

This booklet looks at The Evidence, The Tasks of Adolescence, Why It's Hard for Indian Youth, How to Help and Support, and What Works.

The Evidence

For Indian youth, adolescence is a very difficult time. Let's look at the supporting data.

In elementary school, many Indian children lag one to two years behind scholastically. By high school, the gap has increased and many fall two to four years behind.

In urban areas, 80 percent of Indian youth drop out of school with most leaving between the 8th and 9th grades. The drop out rate for high school students on reservations and in boarding schools is high also (50 percent) but clearly lower than the 80 percent rate for urban Indian adolescents.

Ten to 25 percent of Indian youngsters display symptoms of psychological problems. Young people make up 32 percent of the numbers treated through IHS mental health programs, but receive only 10 percent of the services dispensed.

Many Indian children have undiagnosed and untreated neurosensory disorders and developmental disabilities such as fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effect. Fifty percent of Indian children have otitis

media, an inner ear infection that often contributes to auditory and verbal difficulties.

Many Indian youngsters live in environments where the rate of alcoholism is high and where alcohol and drugs are widely used as a means of coping with depression, anxiety, hostility, and feelings of powerlessness.

The life expectancy for Indians is 44 years. For Native Americans, death by motor vehicle accidents—in most cases involving alcohol—is 5.5 times greater than for the general population. The chances for death by homicide are 2.8 times greater than for the general population. Therefore, by the time an Indian child reaches adolescence, chances are high that he/she will have experienced a traumatic loss within his immediate circle.

Indian youth use alcohol at a rate three times that of adolescents in the general population. They use marijuana and amphetamines at a rate twice that of white adolescents.

Indian youth have a suicide rate three times the national level.

The Tasks of Adolescence

Adolescence for any youngster is a time of change and a time of personal and interpersonal conflict.

All human beings grow basically the same. We all go through specific predictable stages in the way our bodies develop. We also go through certain predictable phases in the development of our psychological and emotional selves.

All of us are born without teeth. We get and lose our baby teeth. We get our adult teeth.

We all pass through certain sexual development stages.

Likewise, all people experience certain predictable psychological and emotional growth stages.

Adolescence is one of them.

WHAT HAPPENS IN ADOLESCENCE?

As any individual approaches young adulthood, certain things happen in his emotional and mental development.

Changes take place. The mind grows and new possibilities and challenges present themselves. These possibilities and challenges are powerful and disruptive. They create unbalance. They stir up the child's entire world and distort all the perceptions on which he is accustomed to rely.

WHAT CHANGES TAKE PLACE?

The child's mind becomes capable of thinking abstractly.

The young child's mind is capable only of concrete thinking. He comprehends that which he is doing at the time. He cannot generalize.

In adolescence, the child's mind becomes capable of perceiving possibilities without actually experiencing them. He begins to be able to weigh options and to generalize from one situation to another.

He begins to realize that reality does not always coincide with what is ideal.

Up until adolescence, the child believes that things exist as they should. The child is an idealist, who believes that what happens occurs because it must.

As he matures, the child's concept of personal choice begins to develop and, with it, comes the discomfort of judgment. He must grapple with the fact that things as they are, may not be as they should; that what is and what can be are often very different.

The adolescent has the very difficult task of adjusting and, perhaps, abandoning his idealism.

As his concepts of time mature, the adolescent is confronted with the need to define his relationship with the future.

Up until adolescence, the child primarily experiences the present. As an infant, the child does not know there is a past and future. As he grows, he slowly becomes aware of their existence and begins to develop concepts of what this means to him.

How much am I controlled by the past? How much can I influence the future? What will I do with my life?

The adolescent begins to see that he is separate and apart from those around him. He begins to see that what he feels may be independent of what others feel.

Up until adolescence, the child's view of himself has been merged and blurred with his view of his parents, his extended family, his community. Where he starts and others begin has been fuzzy. He feels something and assumes the feeling is shared. He wants something and feels everyone wants it.

The adolescent begins to see himself as an individual. He must define who he is in relation to those around him. To do this, he must look at the values of those closest to him. He must determine where he fits in his family, his community, and in the outside world.

Before the adolescent can embrace family and cultural behaviors and values as his own, he must test and compare them to other behaviors and values. He becomes critical and argumentative. He challenges everyone and everything.

But, the adolescent clings hard to the self-centered nature of his childself. As a child, he has existed in an egocentric world.

Three aspects of this egotism hang on through adolescence. The adolescent's egotism has several sword edges. It gives him a shield of invulnerability which, he believes, will protect him through risk-taking. He often feels invincible, as if only "other people" experience negative consequences.

His egotism makes him feel as if he is the center of what is going on around him. All eyes, he feels, are on him. He feels he is "on stage". Everything he does, he feels, is observed and focused on.

At the same time, the adolescent's egotism causes him to feel isolated and to see himself and his problems as unique. No one else, he feels, is experiencing, nor has ever experienced, such confusion and pain.

WHAT MUST AN ADOLESCENT ACCOMPLISH?

To deal with the changes and challenges of adolescence,

a youth must accomplish certain tasks. He must:

- Learn to think abstractly.
- Learn to distinguish between real and ideal.
- Decide how he will relate to the past and future.
- Develop independence.
- Define his individualism.
- Determine how, as an individual, to fit into and function in the world around him.

Adolescence is also a time when the young person ventures, probably for the first time on his own, from the nurturing, sustaining system of his family and/or community into the outside system of the surrounding world. For the first time, he is more or less alone to sort through and cope with the realities of the new system, which very likely has different rules, and demands different skills, than his family and community do.

Clearly, adolescence is a challenging and disruptive time for any youngster.

Why It's Hard for Indian Youth

Between the age of 11 and 17, an Indian youth—like any other youth—must work through the rites and passages associated with the six tasks of adolescence.

The Indian youth—again like any other youth—is a product of his culture. As a youngster goes through adolescence, his particular culture and its values make the journey with him.

For Indians, culture complicates the already difficult challenges of adolescence.

First, the recent oppressive history of tribes and their present economic and social situation creates terrific stress for all Indians, adolescents included. The Indian adolescent finds all the challenges of adolescence overlaid and complicated by the disruption and dysfunction being experienced by his culture as a whole.

Secondly, some of the basic values of tribal society run counter to the tasks of adolescence.

The Indian youth must not only accomplish the difficult and complicated tasks of adolescence, he is at the same time confronted, face on, with a microcosm of all the problems with which his culture and society struggle.

HERE'S WHAT HAPPENS!

The Move from Concrete to Abstract Thinking

Here's one area where an Indian adolescent has some advantage!

Indian culture utilizes and encourages abstract thinking. Thinking in symbols, in wholes, in an all-encompassing, circle-of-life manner is one of the characteristics of a tribal personality. Indians do not try, like the general society, to pin things down, to stay in one line, to move necessarily in an ordered pattern from A to B to C.

Therefore, in adolescence when the mind begins to develop beyond the constraints of concrete thought patterns, the Indian child has the support and example of his culture to help him understand the possibilities of abstract thinking. In short, this transition is not as discomforting to an Indian adolescent as it may be to other adolescents.

Reconciling the Real with the Ideal

This task is much tougher for the Indian adolescent.

The real world in which many Indian adolescents live is pretty grim. The statistics are inescapable. Poverty, unemployment, violence, death, and despair are often the norm. Alcohol and substance abuse are frequently pervasive.

In many Indian communities, the odds seem pretty much against the ideal. The Indian teachings of what should be have not been attained. The outside world has its own standards, and Indian life often does not meet them.

How much choice does anyone have within his own life? How much control does the individual

Indian have? Do Indians "choose" their situations? Could my parents and family change their lives? Can I?

Explanations for, and adjustments to, reality are a difficult challenge for any adolescent. The task is overwhelming for many Indian adolescents.

Dealing with the Future

This, too, is difficult for the Indian youngster. In adolescence, the future looms. Human development puts the concept of future right in our face.

What will I do with my life? Will I finish high school? Go to college? Will I marry? Can I get a job? Should I leave the reservation?

In general, the dominant US society puts its attention on what is yet to come. It prepares and plans for rewards in the future. Education, job training, employment, retirement are seen, not only for what they offer for the present, but what they promise for the days ahead.

Tribal society, on the other hand, functions more in the present. The demands and realities of tribal life in a natural environment required concentration on the immediate. Tribal people, historically, could not afford much concern for the future. This helped develop an ability among tribal peoples to experience and value the present.

In addition, many questions of the future were answered in the past by tribal custom. Choices were clear, dictated by the immediate demands of daily living. But now many of the old ways are gone.

For the Indian adolescent, therefore, the task of dealing with the concept of future is complicated. His tribal culture sees the future differently than does the world around him, and much of the basis for his culture's views has been eroded. In addition, the dominant society tends to formulate its goals and objectives for the future in terms of the individual. This causes additional conflict for the Indian youngster.

Developing Independence

Traditionally, an Indian child became more important to the economic and social functioning of his family and culture as he matured. In his teens, his obligations and responsibilities to his family greatly increased.

The youth was rewarded with the recognition that he was an important and valuable part of his family and tribal unit. He belonged and he was needed.

This integration into the family unit, while in many ways very positive, conflicts with the adolescent task of developing independence. This Indian cultural characteristic is also out of sync with the tendency of the dominant society to encourage young people to leave the family unit and "stand on their own."

The adolescent task of developing independence, therefore, is compounded for the Indian youngster who must also reconcile his cultural values with the task and with the dominant society's values. Many Indian adolescents, as a result, feel selfish and disloyal to their families as they struggle with issues of independence.

Defining Individualism

Although Indian culture places a high value on self-direction and responsibility, it strongly promotes the good of the group over that of the individual.

Indian children are respected as individuals in that they are given the option of self-direction very early. Child rearing techniques are based on modeling and support. Children are not told how to behave. They are taught by example.

But there are clear and demanding expectations. Indians are expected to exhibit behaviors which help assure the smooth functioning of the group. While each person's right to self-determination is respected, he is not supposed to standout. In many ways, an Indian merges his identity with that of his family and tribe.

All adolescents must answer the questions:

'Who am I and where do I belong?' 'How do I fit in?'

The difficulty of this task is intensified for the Indian

because of the strong value tribal culture places on family and community.

Dealing with the Outside World

All adolescents find themselves moving into the outside world, leaving the comfort and familiarity of their family and community systems more frequently.

Here again, the Indian adolescent's task is compounded. First, the system of his family and community is apt to be vastly different from the system of the outside world with which his junior high and high school years are bringing him into closer contact.

Secondly, as we have seen, tribal society answers many of the questions of adolescence differently than does the dominant society. And again, to complicate the problem, tribal societies are in flux and many old values have been eroded or are being questioned.

In addition, the Indian adolescent must face the fact that the dominant culture often feels as if it is superior and does not value Indian culture. Indian adolescents, not surprisingly, do very poorly on self-esteem tests.

THE RESULTS?

Indian adolescents must not only deal with the normal tasks of adolescence, they must also struggle with and define their Indianness. Because of the transitions presently going on within Indian culture, positive, clearly defined role models are often not readily available. Many Indian adolescents, therefore, wind up putting together a patchwork self.

They take a little from the non-Indian culture, a little from the Indian culture, a little from their schools. Because these sources are in conflict, the values of a patchwork self do not jell. Oftentimes, negative coping patterns—especially reliance on alcohol and drugs—develop.

This can be extremely dangerous for an adolescent, especially because of the normal self-centered

characteristics of children that age. The adolescent's feeling of invulnerability—with his tendency toward risk-taking—increases the dangers of alcohol and substance abuse.

How Can We Help?

Adolescence is a period of life which no youth can avoid. It is something everyone must experience.

As adults, we can help young people through the difficult periods of adolescence if we understand the process in general. We can respond better to any individual young person if we understand the context within which he is behaving.

We can make the passage smoother, and less tumultuous for ourselves as bystanders, if we can depersonalize some of what is happening and think in terms of the adolescent's tasks.

We can also ease the passage by providing some active support.

This support must be culturally specific and tailored if it is to be helpful to Indian youngsters.

What Works?

Indian child development specialists have identified three factors which are very helpful in supporting a young person through adolescence.

A consensus is developing that an Indian youngster's resources for dealing with difficult problems, including adolescence, are greatly strengthened:

- If he is a contributing, significant member of a family;
- If he has positive self-esteem;
- If he has an ongoing relationship with a significant adult.

SUPPORTING THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

Generally, we cannot control a child's family environment. Often, we cannot even significantly influence it. But we

can recognize the importance of family, particularly for the Native American.

Those working with Indian adolescents will be more successful if they constantly remember to view the child as part of his family, tribe and community.

Bring the child's family into activities and discussions as often as possible. Encouraging family involvement, whether you obtain it or not, will help ease the child's struggle as he moves through the adolescent tasks which conflict with his tribal values.

If planning a youngster's school calendar, for example, includes consideration of family and tribal responsibilities, an Indian child will feel more comfortable and will participate more meaningfully. Focusing merely on self often generates feelings of disloyalty and insecurity for an Indian youth.

Discussions of career goals, likewise, may be more productive with Indian students if recognition can be allowed for family and community ties. It's very hard to hook an Indian youth on planning for a future which focuses only on himself.

It is also important in working with Indian youth to recognize that many are coming from dysfunctional families. This does not, however, obliterate their love and respect for family members. Indian youth must be supported in their recognition of the positive values within their family. There are many positives, and it is these that not only sustain the Indian youth but also reinforce his cultural values of family loyalty. These positives must be acknowledged. They might also be highlighted and used as building blocks.

The role of alcohol and substance abuse within families must also be acknowledged. Indian youngsters need to be helped to see that alcohol and drugs create certain patterns within any family. These patterns must be identified and recognized for what they are. Indian youngsters, in an alcoholic family, must learn to place responsibility where it belongs and must see that there is nothing wrong with them. They must also recognize that abusive family patterns continue from generation to generation and that they have the ability to break these patterns for themselves.

As the family role of alcohol and substance abuse is explored with Indian adolescents, again the environment must be supportive and non-judgmental. It helps immensely to have Native American adults, who are respected in the Indian adolescent's community, participate in this.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

More and more data are being presented to indicate that (1) poor life choices, including alcohol and drug abuse, are tied to low self esteem and (2) that Indian youngsters have a lower self-esteem than any other group of youngsters.

Building self-esteem thus becomes a primary strategy for helping Indian adolescents. Activities which build self-esteem will help youth through the difficult periods of adolescence and will likewise help them avoid choices which lead to alcohol and substance abuse.

Group activities, because of tribal values on working together and caring for one another, provide good mechanisms for building self-esteem in Indian youngsters.

A group intended to build self-esteem for Indian youngsters is best composed of Indians alone, rather than Indians mixed with non-Indians. It is also very helpful to have the group facilitator be an Indian. The reasons for this are that the rules and codes which govern interaction between Indian people are vastly different than those that work for non-Indians.

Indian youngsters feel most comfortable, and therefore feel better about themselves, in an environment that is non-competitive, clearly delineated in terms of roles, controlled by socializing and humor as opposed to confrontation, respectful of limits, and goal oriented.

Indian youth are uncomfortable with an approach which encourages them to "open up" and talk about how they feel. They are particularly uncomfortable with group discussions that focus on "family stuff."

An Indian child must be given an out to avoid revealing more than he is comfortable with about his family. Many Indian youngsters will drop from a group rather

than suffer the embarrassment and loss of face they may feel from exposing their families.

Indian youth are also uncomfortable dealing with the jockeying and power struggles that go on as non-Indian youth settle into their respective roles in a group. Indian youngsters feel more comfortable when they have, from the start, a clear idea of the role and status of everyone in the group.

Peer helping and participation will be a natural response among Indian youngsters, but conflict for leadership is counter to encouraging high self-esteem in Indian youth. The leadership of an Indian youth group is best in the hands of an adult whose role is clearly acknowledged.

Indian adolescents will feel good about themselves doing things which stress cooperation and which focus on a particular purpose. Running clubs, dance groups, theater productions, and outdoor-oriented activities have been particularly successful in building self-esteem for Indian youngsters.

Whatever the activity, for Indian youth, good feelings come from working together.

DEVELOPING ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Because of the disruption of their tribal culture and the resultant dysfunction in many tribal families and communities, many Indian youngsters profit from a significant connection with an "outside" adult. Such a connection may help a youngster learn how to deal with the world outside his family; in some cases, such a connection can be therapeutically essential for an at-risk youth struggling with alcohol and substance abuse.

Significant "outside" adult connections are more easily developed with Indian youth when certain factors are considered.

First, it must be recognized that it is intrinsically hard for Indian youth to connect with someone outside their family and community because they may feel disloyal.

Secondly, trust is a primary prerequisite that takes time to develop. An Indian child needs time to accept an

outsider's intentions. The outsider must come to know the child. That often means spending time with him alone, since an Indian child is reluctant to reveal his problems in a group. He feels he should be strong enough to solve his problems on his own.

Patience is necessary. The outsider must recognize that the Indian child comes from a culture which is long-suffering. Tribal peoples are often reluctant to accept, or seek, intervention because of their belief that there is a reason *for* everything and that, when it is time, the situation will change.

The best way to encourage trust is to minimize the "obvious" differences between the child and the adult. The more similarities the adult shares with the child, the better. Being an Indian, having experience with particular tribal cultures, growing up in a culturally-disrupted community, being a child in an alcoholic family; whatever the particular situation, the more an adult might share in his background with a child, the easier it is to bridge trust.

The Silver Lining

culture in which they are involved, come back—after their adolescent turmoil—to the values of their parents.

If the parents' values are strong enough, if the community's values are clear enough, the great likelihood is that the child will return to his culture as an adult.

The questioning and challenging of adolescence does not mean that the parent, family, or culture will lose the child to the outside world.

Acknowledgements

This booklet was published, under the guidance of Robert L. Bennett, by the Native American Development Corporation, a non-profit tax-exempt organization wholly owned and controlled by Native Americans. Program and financial management was provided by Arrow, Inc., a Native American non-profit tax-exempt organization based in Washington, DC.

Funds for the booklet were provided by the US Department of Education's Drug-Free Schools and Communities Program. However, the contents do not necessarily represent opinions or policy of the Department of Education and endorsement by the federal government of the ideas presented should not be assumed.

The text was written by Nancy Gale based on interviews with Gay Munsell, a Native American child development specialist with the National Resource Center for Youth Services at the University of Oklahoma in Tulsa.

The photographs were taken by Nancy Gale, Cory Gale and Danny Gale. The cover photo and photos on pages 3 and 14 are by Ms. Gale; the photos on the introductory page and page 19 are by Cory; and the photos on pages 1, 7, and 13 are by Danny. The people posing for the photos are healthy, well-functioning individuals.

Masculine pronouns are used throughout the text as a means of making it easier to read. There is no intention to imply that problems of adolescence or alcohol/drug abuse are experienced more frequently or more severely by males than by females. It should also be noted that the word "family" as used in the text is intended to include, as it does in Indian culture, members of the child's extended family.

Copies of this booklet may be ordered, for printing and mailing costs, from the Native American Development Corporation, 1000 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite #1206, Washington, DC 20036. Telephone: (202) 296-0685.

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